

AIDS Brief

for sectoral planners
and managers

Commercial Agriculture Sector



The HIV/AIDS epidemic is a global crisis that demands urgent attention and committed sustained action by alliances of individuals, organisations and sectors. The AIDS Brief series has been developed to support the conceptualisation and implementation of key sectoral responses. The commercial agriculture sector, with its sound infrastructure, is well placed to disseminate information and collaborate on responses to mitigate against the impact of HIV/AIDS. However, AIDS should not be tagged onto the end of all the other agricultural issues, and a "wake-up call" is necessary. If commercial agriculture is to remain in business, it must recognise its vulnerability and urgently approach the epidemic with the seriousness that it warrants. Effective and accessible prevention programmes and concerted mitigation strategies involving all stakeholders must be put in place.

BACKGROUND

Definition of Commercial Agriculture

Commercial agriculture is market-orientated farming production.

Facts about the Commercial Agriculture sector

The commercial agricultural sector is of considerable importance in most developing countries. It contributes substantially to the gross domestic product, is a major source of foreign exchange earnings, is frequently the largest single employer of wage labour, and is vital in determining the food security of a country. The viability of the agricultural sector has a direct impact on the economy as a whole, as it draws its inputs from support industries and services and feeds its outputs into the manufacturing sector as inputs.

As an example, it is said in Zimbabwe: "if agriculture sneezes, the rest of the



economy catches a cold."

The essential support structures that

contribute to the stability and viability of commercial agriculture include government departments, unions and commodity associations, banking and financial institutions, agricultural engineering, chemical, fertilizer, seed, transport and fuel industries, veterinary services, electricity supply, communications and regional cooperative authorities. In addition, there exists a close interface between commercial farming and subsistence agriculture.

The economic viability of a product or commodity will determine the level of investment committed to the enterprise and to overall development.

AIDS AND THE COMMERCIAL AGRICULTURE SECTOR

In considering the impact of HIV/AIDS on commercial agriculture, there is a need to look beyond the farm level to the entire industry. HIV/AIDS impacts directly on human resources and indirectly on the operations of commercial agriculture.

Labour

Although this sector may have relatively high capital input, it remains, particularly in developing countries, dependent on a high level of labour, both permanent and seasonal. In developing countries access to specific therapies for

HIV/AIDS is not an option. HIV-infected adults will thus face many episodes of illness until their demise. Consequently labour and sector productivity are directly affected by any factors contributing to HIV transmission and subsequent levels of morbidity and mortality.

Productivity will be reduced because of:

- Increased illness and low energy levels
- Absenteeism to seek treatment or to care for sick relatives
- Drops in nutrition due to less financial resources as a result of additional health costs
- Healthy employees required for additional overtime
- Time off for funerals and prolonged mourning periods
- Loss of skills and experience

Operations

Operations will be affected by:

- Difficulty in planning work
- Difficulty in meeting agrarian deadlines
- Skills poaching as skilled labour become scarcer
- Increased absenteeism, death and associated costs
- Increased recruitment and training costs
- Need to employ additional staff with ancillary costs e.g. additional housing
- Younger less experienced workers making expensive mistakes
- Loss of operations and location-specific knowledge
- Loss of motivation and team continuity
- Poor morale
- Increased demands for additional credit, transport, off-time, 'light' duties
- Strained employer/employee relationships

External interactions

With HIV/AIDS impacting also in the rural subsistence areas, a commercial farm labourer may have to relinquish his paid position to take over the reins at home. At this point there will be competition for labour. The regular supply

of seasonal labour from the communal lands during peak seasons may diminish, resulting in "labour poaching" between farms. Poverty in communal lands may result in an increase in widows/single mothers seeking employment on farms. This can have a destabilising effect on marriages and exacerbate the spread of HIV/AIDS. Furthermore, at the subsistence level, any disruption in family farm labour will affect the ability adequately to control pests and diseases in crops and livestock, which has repercussions for both sectors. Any reduction in food crop security in the subsistence sector increases dependence on commercial agriculture to make up the deficit.

Many developing countries are faced with "Economic Structural Adjustment Programmes" and cost-reducing strategies. These cost-saving initiatives have several negative impacts on sectors such as agriculture, already reeling from the effects of AIDS. For example, salary increments may be inadequate to retain staff in government departments, leading to a 'brain drain' to the private sector. This loss of experience, coupled with the loss of manpower from ill health/death and the 'freezing' of posts, serves to incapacitate departments particularly where professional positions are involved. For example, the death of a driver within the veterinary department may mean that the veterinary officer now has to serve as both messenger and veterinary officer.

Deaths of highly trained, skilled and experienced employees contribute substantially to the difficulties encountered in manpower planning. These losses in skilled employees may lead to a drop in standards.

Additional costs to governments could arise from:

- loss of skilled labour in certain specialised areas that require replacement by higher paid expatriates or international employees
- importation of foodstuffs or other items needed to supplement the loss of productivity
- loss of exports resulting from a drop in quality and quantity, and quarantine restrictions.

The African experience

Whilst specific data on HIV/AIDS in any meaningful study are not available, anecdotal evidence suggests that there may be a serious problem. Farming communities, because of their isolation, tend to be 'closed communities' with labour rotating between the same farms. Transmission of HIV may be facilitated by an itinerant population of largely female casual workers who move from farm to farm seeking seasonal work. Many ethnic groups with different cultural norms and practices may be represented in farm populations, and farm communities often lack cohesion. Traditional elders, who normally play a pivotal role in the rural areas in terms of marriage negotiation, arbitration in disputes, moral guidance and cultural heritage, are absent on farms. Consequently marriages are often not formalised and relationships are easily dissolved and often characterised by abdicated responsibility and abandonment of families. Education opportunities may be limited. Recreation facilities usually centre on informal bars where commercial sex may be readily available. Access to treatment for sexually transmitted infections may be inadequate and delayed because of distance to clinic and the necessity to take time off from work. Condoms may not be easily accessible or acceptable. All these factors exacerbate transmission risks.

IMPACT CHECKLIST

The susceptibility of a workforce is influenced by the risk environment, the socio-economic circumstances, gender relations, culture and livelihood strategies.

The vulnerability of the sector to the pandemic depends on the size of the population in the sector, and the degree of susceptibility of that population relative to the rest of the society, compounded with the actual level of infection of the overall population. The impact of AIDS can therefore be reduced by anything that diminishes any of the above factors, namely:

1. Reduce labour
2. Reduce labour susceptibility

3. Reduce level of infection in overall population by reducing population vulnerability.

Internal risk profile

Workforce issues

- ✓ Are there large concentrations of workers? Single sex?
- ✓ Are marriages frequently unstable?
- ✓ Is the operation dependent on the employment of migrant/seasonal workers?
- ✓ Are contract workers commonly employed, for example: carpenters, electricians, builders, brick-moulders, thatchers, security guards? Do they live in the same

villages as the permanent work force?

- ✓ Are there many single women/widows seeking employment opportunities?
- ✓ Do the farm foremen or supervisors have much authority in job/task allocation? Is there the possibility of sexual exploitation of vulnerable employees?
- ✓ What proportion of the workforce are foreigners and how many of the remaining workforce have regular ties to their communal lands?
- ✓ Are the farming operations dependent on high levels of management skills and supervision? Are these key people the weakest link in the chain of farming

operations i.e. if one were likely to succumb suddenly, would the gap created by their loss adversely affect production?

- ✓ Does the farm have a Health Worker? Is there a health facility nearby? Any public transport?
- ✓ Are STIs common and are 'social diseases' treated differently in terms of company policy for sick-pay, time off etc?
- ✓ Are condoms consistently easily and discreetly available?
- ✓ Does the farming enterprise have a policy regarding provision of medical benefits, funeral assistance, assistance to bereaved families, support for widows/orphans?
- ✓ Will the enterprise be able to sustain these benefits as the epidemic worsens?
- ✓ Do recreation facilities centre round the bar?
- ✓ Is there provision for on-farm training and understudying?
- ✓ Are there accessible school facilities for the youth? Is there an AIDS programme in the schools? Are there any facilities or opportunities for skills training for out-of-school youth/school dropouts?

Operations

- ✓ Are the farming operations very labour intensive? Does the enterprise have the capacity for mechanisation, e.g. centre pivot irrigation versus hand-moved pipes?
- ✓ Does the enterprise have the capacity to adopt a cropping programme that enables constant use of labour throughout the year?
- ✓ Does the enterprise depend on attracting capital, e.g. direct investment, loans, etc.?
- ✓ Is there a budget line for coping with the additional expenses involved as a consequence of the impact of HIV/AIDS on the farming operations?

External risk profile

- ✓ Will AIDS affect the market for the products produced/services provided?
- ✓ Will the impact of infection amongst the departmental employees affect the ability of government departments to fulfil their agriculture-related functions?
- ✓ Are government departments preparing for the impact of HIV on the wider society, e.g. changed age structure of the population and the different implications for housing,

education and welfare needs and uptake of services?

- ✓ What preparations are governments putting in place to ensure the protection of the export-orientated products against a breakdown in disease and quality control?
- ✓ With an anticipated reduction in or breakdown of other essential services, such as security, communications, power supply, rail and road transport services, what contingency plans are possible to protect the sector and the key players?
- ✓ Are public education programmes being developed to destigmatise HIV/AIDS, especially targeted at countries of low sero-prevalence which represent some of the external markets for agricultural products, i.e. if consumers knew the product consumed was handled by a 50% HIV-infected population, would they still buy the product? Could there develop an unspoken consumer resistance and a move towards "untouched by HIV hands" products?

SECTORAL RESPONSE

The key to limiting susceptibility is "ownership" by leadership at all levels, beginning with government. The extent of the epidemic makes it imperative for all government departments, by partnership programmes and integrated, imaginative and innovative responses, to help manage the impact of existing infections and continue preventative efforts to slow the rate of new infections. The cost of care and treatment may exhaust health resources and prevention is cheaper than treatment. Further, governments have the capability and responsibility to disseminate reliable information about HIV and deal with policy and legal responses associated with human rights issues.

The activities of many sectors provide a window of opportunity for prevention programmes. For example, comprehensive HIV/AIDS training and education can be integrated into existing training and education programmes and extended to all partners. This, in turn, will strengthen the capacity of extension services and essential services to address HIV within their activities.

Policies and programmes need to be reviewed to ensure that they consider the effects of the HIV/AIDS epidemic on the sector. Apply HIV/AIDS assessments to all projects/programmes. Integrate HIV/AIDS issues into

financial planning. Costs due to HIV increase exponentially and preventative expenditure can save considerable amounts for future investments. Comprehensive HIV/AIDS workplace policies, at both sectoral and farm level, must be developed that stress HIV prevention and the interface between commercial and subsistence agriculture.

Donors should place HIV assistance at the core of country programmes and support could be sought from the World Bank through its regional programmes, in Africa known as "Rural AIDS Initiative". Assistance from the FAO in rural preventative programmes may be possible.

The sector should improve the socio-economic environment through improved housing and recreational facilities as well as promoting community projects and micro-credit schemes (particularly for women). This may require lobbying for assistance with incentives such as tax-credits to improve infrastructure and services. It may also require forming partnerships with other sectors, councils and NGOs to shift the burden of responsibility to a wider resource base.

Human resource development should aim to diffuse skills and develop systems of horizontal and vertical flexibility, as well as promoting on-the-job training and under-

studying of key workers in production.

Additional attention should be paid to education, apprenticeship and skills training opportunities for youth, both in and out of school. Sexuality and reproductive health issues should be incorporated into all youth extension programmes. Economic empowerment of youth provides them with opportunity, motivation and self-worth, which may help stem the tide of a repetition of the HIV cycle within their generation. Promote realistic programmes to support/accommodate youth employment as they care for ailing parents and younger siblings. Explore accommodative (vs. exploitative) labour practices with clear definition of working conditions thus ensuring protection and the right to appeal.

Destigmatise HIV/AIDS as a priority. Whilst there is the need for a culture of sensitivity and protection towards HIV-positive people, there is equally a need to promote incentives for HIV-negative people. This can act as a motivating mechanism for the avoidance of risky behaviour.

Increase health care facilities, to cope with the additional demand for care, increase counselling and test sites and expand home based care programmes.

Continue and expand support to orphan programmes. Care is a form of prevention.

ACTION CHECKLIST

Assessment studies

- ✓ Conduct a situation analysis of the impact of HIV/AIDS on the agricultural sector within the context of the national impact
- ✓ Plan strategically and realistically for a national response within the sector
- ✓ Plan specifically for the needs of agriculture
- ✓ Involve key stakeholders
- ✓ Make HIV/AIDS statistics available to all planners, not just the Health sector
- ✓ Conduct impact assessments
- ✓ Undertake vulnerability mapping
- ✓ Re-evaluate the impact of Structural Adjustment Programmes on the effective delivery of key services and review "post freezing"

Policies/Benefits

- ✓ Develop a 'Workplace Policy' on HIV/AIDS, in line with national policy, and make it known to all within the sector
- ✓ Re-evaluate the systems of benefits to combine prudent business practice with a humane and compassionate attitude towards the individual
- ✓ Encourage donors to place HIV assistance at the core of country programmes
- ✓ Lobby for tax credits on housing, health and educational infrastructure expenses

Contingency plans

- ✓ Make contingency plans, as a sector, to deal with the impact of HIV/AIDS on essential services such as electricity supply, communications and security
- ✓ Explore possibilities of mixed-cropping with sustained use of labour year round and less dependence on the influx of seasonal labour
- ✓ Include a budget line for HIV/AIDS in all financial planning, and plan for the development of improved social amenities on a progressive basis
- ✓ Develop a skills succession plan, institute under-studying, apprenticeship training and multi-skilling programmes on farms

Prevention and health

- ✓ Ensure that health education and HIV/AIDS prevention programmes are in place and prioritised amongst all training programmes. STI management, information and reproductive health as well as referral options for common illnesses should be included
- ✓ Ensure all education and awareness activities are regular in implementation and periodically reviewed by employers and employees jointly

- ✓ Ensure that prevention strategies are also targeted at seasonal workers, contract employees and all other public life on farms
- ✓ Recommend that HIV voluntary counselling and testing services are made available in the surrounding communities

Socio-economic environment

- ✓ Expand recreational facilities with consultation and involvement of the potential users. Ensure appropriate recreation facilities are also available for women and youth
- ✓ Create a supportive environment, where possible, for those infected and affected by HIV/AIDS to help deal with the associated stresses, and to encourage those still productive
- ✓ Facilitate, at the household level, existing coping mechanisms and support income generating and nutrition projects
- ✓ Plan for increased on-farm support for infected and affected individuals including home based care and support for orphans and children in especially difficult circumstances
- ✓ Increase the focus on youth and youth empowerment
- ✓ Learn from 'Best Practices' and other sectors

SUMMARY

The success of any enterprise is invariably tied to the quality of its human resources. Consequently the loss of skilled and experienced personnel, for whatever reason, is of serious concern to any sector. HIV/AIDS, and the protracted morbidity and mortality associated with it, has a profound impact not only on medical but also on overall economic and social dimensions of life.

Commercial Agriculture has a greater capacity

to cope with the impact of HIV/AIDS than subsistence agriculture and hence ensure food security for a country. It has more capacity to operate between both mechanised and labour-intensive practices than most other sectors. This advantage is dependent on the sector taking the initiative in safeguarding the welfare of its workforce, making contingency plans well in advance of serious impact, and collaborating with all key players to

mitigate against the effects of HIV/AIDS.

This requires a re-thinking of policy, sound financial planning and a realistic look at the impact on viability and hence appropriate subsequent actions. Serious attention to these issues could ensure that further rural development takes place and commercial agriculture can continue to contribute substantially to the welfare and economy of countries and regions.

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Series Editor: Rose Smart

Layout : TheWriteStuff, Durban

The individual authors of the AIDS Briefs series are wholly responsible in their private capacity for content and interpretation.

Funded by the USAID
Bureau for Africa,
Office of Sustainable
Development
Award No.
AOT-G-00-97-00375-00

